

Fall 8-15-2000

ENG 2007-002

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English 2007-002
Fall, 2000

2007-002

Kilgore

SYLLABUS

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Required Texts: Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, third edition (WF)
Kenison & Tan, eds., *Best American Short Stories*, 1999 (BSS)
Dozois, ed., *The Year's Best Science Fiction* (SF)

Course requirements: regular class attendance and participation; assigned readings in the texts; very careful reading of work by other students; assigned exercises in workbook; three short stories of about 1200-2500 words each, the first two of these to be distributed for class discussion; optional rewrite of first or second story, with new grade replacing the old. **The three stories will count for about 60% of the final grade, the workbook for about 25%, participation and intangibles about 15%.** I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages.

Exercises may serve "double duty"—i.e., be revised and handed in as stories.

The textbook. Burroway's *Writing Fiction* is a comprehensive, readable, wise how-to manual for fiction writers. Liberal chunks of it have been included in the assigned readings, and the book is certain to be helpful—eventually—to anyone who does the readings faithfully. There will not be much time, however, for direct discussion of Burroway's advice, as we need to devote precious class time to more focused exercises: writing, brainstorming, critiquing one another's work, arguing about published stories. But please do this part of the reading patiently and carefully; eventually you will start seeing some important connections and your writing will benefit from it.

The workbook. Will be a place where important basic exercises are done all semester long, and where (with luck) many stories start. Please be aware, though, that your workbook can be very difficult to read and evaluate unless you take special pains to keep it organized. Accordingly, **please observe the following guidelines:**

****Use a pocket folder, NOT a spiral notebook, NOT a loose leaf binder, so that you and I can conveniently reshuffle assignments.**

****Write your name in large, clear letters on both the inside and the outside of the folder.**

****Type every assignment.** In-class writings done by hand will often serve as drafts for assigned exercises, but should then be typed up out of class, with revisions as you see fit. If you want to keep the handwritten version, store it elsewhere—NOT in this folder.

****Make sure every assignment has a heading, a date, and your name. I will not read or give credit for items that lack headings.**

****Use one pocket of your workbook for reading responses, the other for exercises.** Label each pocket. Within each pocket, arrange all assignments chronologically. Use a paper clip to keep assignments I have already read from new work you are handing in for the first time.

****Reading responses will consist of brief essays (about 2-300 words) on assigned works which appear in **boldface** in the schedule below.** Their purpose is to ensure a thoughtful, explicit response to the readings. The schedule gives further guidelines for each essay.

****Exercises** are creative projects that try to a) drill you in fairly specific skills needed by fiction writers; b) stimulate story ideas. With luck some of these will “take off” and turn into stories, and you are welcome to turn in the same prose twice, though of course extensive revisions should normally take place between the workbook stage and the finished-story stage. The schedule lists only titles or brief descriptions for each exercise; more detailed explanation will be given in class.

****INCLUDE NOTHING ELSE IN THE WORKBOOK.** No class notes, no handouts, no scratch paper, no handwritten first drafts of stories or exercises. Just the reading responses and the exercises, neatly arranged.

****Keep your workbook up to date,** as I will be collecting it frequently during the semester, sometimes on short notice.

STORIES. Should be the fruit of long and thoughtful revision—third or fourth drafts, put into the very best form you can manage at the moment, though subject (of course) to further revision should you have new ideas after workshop discussion. Grading will be “holistic”—a single grade, based on the overall aesthetic success of your story, as best I can estimate it. But this does NOT mean we will or can overlook sloppiness in the basic writing. Clear and articulate writing at the sentence level is a must (yes, even for first-person stories in dialect) because everything starts there.

MANUSCRIPT FORM. All assignments must be typewritten. Workshop stories should be SINGLE-SPACED (to save copying expense), and you must provide multiple copies—one for each member of the class. Skip an extra space between paragraphs when single spacing (as I am doing on this page). Please use no fonts smaller than 10 point. The final story will not go into workshop, so it should be DOUBLE SPACED, and no extra copies will be necessary. Ditto for rewrites. Omit extra spacing between paragraphs on double-spaced manuscripts.

Whenever you hand in something you prefer not to have read by the rest of the class, write “DR” (“don’t read”) at the top of the first page. Anything else is fair game, and I will assume that I have your permission to copy it and hand it out to the class.

ATTENDANCE POLICY. Attendance and participation are key aspects of your performance in English 2007. Accordingly, I will take attendance (by means of a sign-up sheet) every session. The resulting record, adjusted slightly for the quality of your class participation, will be used to figure a participation grade equal to about 15% of the final grade for the course. Scale for the participation grade: **0-1 absences = A, 2 = B, 3 = C, 4 = D, 5 = F; more than 5—**continuing, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade).

Note that you have 1-2 “free” absences. Use these if you have to, but otherwise keep them as insurance. I will listen sympathetically to excuses, but **I will not normally award attendance credit for any session that you have missed.** In truly exceptional circumstances, however, when you really can’t be blamed for missing either the free days or days beyond that, I MAY be willing to assign difficult and challenging make-up work for attendance credit. See me if you prefer make-up work to taking the absence. (Hint: It’s easier just to be here. Honest.) Note: it is your responsibility to find and sign the attendance sheet at each session.

LATE WORK. Always get in touch with me BEFORE the deadline if you expect to be late with an assignment; the chances are pretty good that I can grant you a short extension. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from B+ to B) for each calendar day of lateness, weekends and holidays included. Pick up the phone, dial my number, and save yourself from this demoralizing fate.

MISCELLANEOUS. There will be no final examination.

I will be more than happy to grant reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Contact me immediately if you will be needing such an accommodation.

Please make a habit of bringing this syllabus to class, as we will need to adjust it rather frequently during the semester.

SCHEDULE

NOTE: AFTER THE FIRST WEEK, PLEASE COMPLETE ALL READINGS BY THE BEGINNING OF THE WEEK IN WHICH THEY ARE ASSIGNED. BE SURE TO READ THE STORIES INCLUDED IN THE CHAPTERS IN WF WHEN THEY ARE SPECIFICALLY SCHEDULED FOR DISCUSSION; OTHERWISE THEY ARE OPTIONAL. EXERCISES SHOULD BE DONE BY MONDAY OF THE WEEK AFTER THEY ARE ASSIGNED.

1) August 21-25

READING: WF, Chapter 1. "The Use of Force," Williams, WF43; "The Sun, The Moon, The Stars," Diaz, BSS15.

Course Introduction: Work ahead, as assignments in upcoming weeks are heavy.

2) August 28-September 1

READING RESPONSE (about 500 words): A) Take a very close look at the beginnings of both Williams' story and Diaz's. In each case, how is it that we immediately understand that we are reading fiction rather than nonfiction? What's different in the prose? Is there a technique or trick for beginning a story that you can spot here? B) Keying your remarks to specific passages or quotations, show how either Williams or Diaz creates the effect of a speaking voice. C) Occasionally both stories remind us of the *distance* in time between the narrator and the events being narrated. Cite and briefly discuss one such instance. Why would the writer want to take us out of the story in this way?

EXERCISE: In the first person, write a reminiscence of a time, a place, or an action that comes from at least five years back in your past. Make the reader aware of the lapse in time that separates the narration "now" and the experience itself. Feel free to fictionalize and invent. **OR:** In the first-person, confess to the commission of some evil or illegal or shameful act. Feel VERY free to fictionalize and invent.

OTHER: Be thinking about topic for 1st story.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: The writing process. The rhetoric of beginnings. **Tell story in class.**

3) September 5-8

READING: WF, Chapter 3. "The Things They Carried," O'Brien, WF74.

EXERCISE: Five days of consecutive daily entries, 75-200 words per day, September 6-10. *Suggested topics: [Note: feel free to substitute exercises of your own invention.]*

- Capture in writing the *voice* of someone you know well. As your speaker narrates some fairly ordinary episode, let his or her character emerge vividly, though perhaps inadvertently, through choice of language and detail.
- Describe some person you dislike, using a made-up name, bringing the portrait to life with significant, vivid detail. Fictionalize as freely as you like.
- In a sketch of at least 100 words, capture the most interesting thing that has happened to you in the last three days. Avoid summary.
- Overhear a dialogue in some public place. Transcribe exactly what you hear. Then edit the transcript and write an imagined continuation of the dialogue. *Note:* you won't have to overhear much—dialogue fills up the pages in a hurry.
- Remembering that the impact of fiction depends less on what happens than how vividly that "what" is realized, write something shocking. Write rapidly and continuously for no more than 40 minutes. If you then can't stand to show me the results, file them and hand in something else.
- Picture the worst thing you can imagine happening to you, happening. Write a sketch that makes this horrible fantasy real. Feel better now?

- In the third person, write a detailed sketch of someone performing a skilled activity you are proficient in.

OTHER: Begin Story #1 whenever you feel ready.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Sensory detail; information versus experience; concrete language; imagery and metaphor. Readings from the workbooks.

4) September 11-15

READING: WF, Chapter 2. "Where are You Going, Where Have You Been," Oates, WF 83. "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," BSS29.

READING RESPONSE (about 300 words): Overall appreciation or critique of *either* O'Brien's story or Oates's. Try to say with some precision why the story you choose does or does not work for you. What things has the author done well or badly?

EXERCISE: In-class, paint-by-numbers story, revised out of class.

OTHER: Begin Story # 1.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Story form and structure. Narrative passages and scenes; chronological vs. topical organization.

5) September 18-22

READING: WF, Chapter 6, pages 181-87 only; Chapter 7, all (but stories are optional). From BSS: Gautreaux, "The Piano Tuner," 78; Hardy, "The Uncharted Heart," 97.

READING RESPONSE: None.

EXERCISE: Write the same event or sequence of events as A) a sentence; B) a paragraph; C) a sketch of one and a half to two pages.

OTHER: Write and revise Story # 1.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Distance and empathy in first-person narration. Point of view.

6) September 25-29

READING: WF, Chapter 8. "Yours," Robison, WF116; "The Point," WF118.

READING RESPONSE: None.

EXERCISE: None.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Point of view. Story conferences as needed.

7) October 2-6

READING: WF, Chapter 8. Stories for workshop discussion. "The Robbers of Karnataka," Spencer, BSS316.

READING RESPONSE: None.

EXERCISE: None.

OTHER: STORY #1 DUE--IN MULTIPLE COPIES.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop.

8) October 9-13

READING: Stories for Workshop discussion. "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings," WF188.

READING RESPONSE: Compare the use of third-person, limited-omniscient point of view in "Mrs.

Dutta Writes a Letter" (BSS29) and "The Robbers of Karnataka" (BSS316). Which character are we more aware of as "unreliable" and somewhat deluded? Why and how does this happen?

EXERCISE: In the third person, write two short sketches in which your point of view character perceives or reflects on another character he or she finds irritating.

OTHER: Begin Story #2 when you feel ready.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop; assigned stories.

9) October 16-20

READING: WF, Chapter 4. "The Bunchgrass Edge of the Word," Proulx, BSS294.

READING RESPONSE: None.

EXERCISE: Character sketches; 2-3 strangers observed on the sly, about 150 words each. Plus: a character study profiling someone you know well, filled with the concrete details that show who this person is; about 250 words.

OTHER: Begin Story # 2 when you feel ready.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop. Round and flat characters. Character concept; depth, and surface.

10) October 23-27

READING: WF, Chapter 5. "Ralph the Duck," Busch, WF 314.

READING RESPONSE: None.

EXERCISE: Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, anger, or emotional hurt from your past. Then sketch the moment as fully and thoroughly as possible without ever once making direct reference to any emotion, or relying on obvious physical cues (tears trickling down cheeks, long sighs, etc.) to evoke emotion. Concentrate instead on capturing the physical details that define the moment, bringing in background as relevant. Continue the sketch for about 500 words, letting it begin to turn into a story if it seems to want to.

OTHER: Work on Story # 2.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Assigned stories. Conflict in characters; character presentation.

11) October 30-November 3

READING: "Even the Queen," Willis, SF 62. "Snodgrass," Mcleod, SF491 **Optional, recommended stories from the SF anthology:** "The Round-Eyed Barbarians," 76; "The Territory," 394; "Outnumbering the Dead," 519.

READING RESPONSE: Write tight, vivid, readable capsule summaries, 1-2 paragraphs each, of "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World," "Ralph the Duck," "Even the Queen," and "Snodgrass." In each case, give a reader who has not read the story a clear sense of its tone and content.

EXERCISE: None.

OTHER: STORY # 2 DUE—IN MULTIPLE COPIES.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Science Fiction and genre writing.

12) November 6-10

READING: Stories for Workshop discussion.

READING RESPONSE: None.

EXERCISE (about 250 words): In the third-person, limited omniscient, portray yourself at some

particular moment, perhaps engaged in some simple action or process, as seen from some strikingly divergent point of view, e.g. a pet, an alien just arrived on earth, a serial killer, or someone desperately attracted to you.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop.

13) November 13-17

READING: "A Small, Good Thing," Carver, WF 344. Stories for Workshop discussion.

READING RESPONSE: None.

EXERCISE(about 500 words): In the third-person, write a scene based on an ordinary, not obviously dramatic moment in your recent personal experience. Stick as closely as you can to the facts, but lend interest to the action by filling in interesting, appropriate background.

OTHER: Begin Story # 3.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop.

THANKSGIVING BREAK, NOVEMBER 20-24

14)) November 27-December 1

READING: Kaplan, "Life Lived King-Sized," BSS189.

READING RESPONSE: Write an imitation or parody of one of the two stories: "A Small, Good Thing," or "Life Lived King-Sized." About 500 words.

EXERCISE: None.

OTHER: Work on optional rewrites. Write and revise Story #3.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Workshop and assigned story.

FRIDAY: LAST DAY FOR OPTIONAL REWRITES

15) December 4-8

READING: WF, Chapter 11.

MONDAY: WORKBOOK DUE.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION: Revision and editing; style and voice.

STORY #3 DUE—WEDNESDAY OR FRIDAY.

Group reading.